

“...every time we take a step we’re surrounded by the ideological birds of prey who feed on our possibilities, fill themselves with concepts of our desires and reenslave us with beautiful combinations of words which seem to depict the world we failed to realize.

a preview of
Fredy Perlman’s
**Letters
of
Insurgents**
to be published by
Left Bank Books

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If your only connection with the Sophia I once knew is your name, then please let me ask you to do a small favor for a fellow human being who has not fared well in this bizarre world: please let me know that you received this letter. I can't hide the impatience with which I wait for your answer.

Yarostan.

That day I regained my desire to express myself. I have an urge to write everything down. Yet I can't imagine who you are now, what you're thinking, what you've done, if you're married and have children, or even if you're alive and well. I have no right to bore you with an interminable letter which you might regard as an unwanted intervention by a complete stranger. You did send me a letter once, but not having seen it I can't assume it contained anything more than a delayed Christmas greeting. But you did write something, you did initiate some sort of correspondence, and I'm trying to write you an answer and to explain why I couldn't write sooner. I want to tell you about myself and I long to learn about you. My daughter's brave act renewed my interest in living and intensified my curiosity. Since that day I've learned that Yara's demonstration was neither exceptional nor original. Protests against dismissals and arrests of teachers have recently become frequent events in the schools. And the protests aren't limited to students. Full-fledged strikes complete with strike committees, bulletins and support groups are taking place in some large factories. Until recently everyone knew about these events yet everyone denied them. Officially they weren't taking place. Everyday language — a language impoverished by official lies — had for twenty years ceased to be an instrument for communicating about real events. When I first returned from prison Mirna was afraid I would exert a demonic influence on Yara. She warned the child daily: "Don't start anything; don't get into trouble." Trouble could only lead to imprisonment. But Yara began to experience "trouble" as something positive: trouble meant protests, demonstrations and strikes, it meant individual and collective acts of defiance. Trouble referred to the heroic deeds of individuals and groups praised in her schoolbooks. I was unaware of Yara's growing defiance until the day of her demonstration, just as I failed to notice the grumbling in the shops and on the streets, the facial expressions in the trams and busses, the defiant gestures in bars, the slogans in toilets, the shouts in the night.

Yara helped me begin to see and hear the return of the repressed, and now I yearn to see yet further and hear yet more. I started this letter several weeks ago but convinced myself it would never reach you and abandoned it twice. My curiosity defeated my doubts. I long to know why you wrote me and what you said to me twelve years ago. I long to know who you are, what you've done, with whom, why. For months after my release I wanted to escape from this city and return to the finite world enclosed by prison walls. Now I find the city itself an enclosure and I'm reaching out to you to help me see and feel a larger world, if only through a letter.

a preview of
Letters of Insurgents

by
Sophia Nachalo
and
Yarostan Vochek

as told by
Fredy Perlman

to be published by
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"But where did you and your friends learn how to do this sort of thing?"

"You mean demonstrations? We're always being told about thousands of workers marching down the street carrying big signs. If they can do it, why can't we?"

"So you all gathered in the schoolyard —"

"It was full of kids with signs. We stood quietly for a long time. Many kids were scared. Someone started to whisper that we would all be arrested. One of the teachers came out and stood with us. A boy standing next to her hugged her and burst out crying. We knew we had won. Other teachers joined us. Finally the principal came out. He said our teacher had been called away by mistake and that he'd be back next week. Everyone knew he was lying about it being a mistake. But no one cared. Kids started screeching, wrestling, hugging each other and hugging their teachers. Some kids even ran up to the principal and threw their arms around him."

"Do you know why your teacher had been arrested?"

"Sure. He wants us to think on our own and they don't, that's why. He always told us the explanations in our books weren't the only explanations, that many things have lots of different explanations and we have to choose the one we like best."

Words are too poor to convey what I felt when Yara described her "protest." I was "cured." In one sudden leap I had rejoined the living. My species had not, after all, undergone a mutation — at least not a permanent one. Such an event would require a far greater catastrophe than the rule of an organization of prison officials. "People can't disappear." How right she is! Wherever there are people there's negation, rebellion, insurrection. When twenty-year olds repress and mutilate their humanity, the repressed humanity reappears intact among ten-year olds. I threw my arms around Yara and she danced me around the room. "Father, would you teach me different explanations of things so I can choose the ones I like best?" she asked.

Mirna burst out crying. She had stood speechless in the corner of the room during the entire scene. I had wrongly interpreted her silence as hostility toward the girl's rebellious act. Mirna ran to embrace Yara, rested her head on the girl's shoulder and sobbed.

"Don't be sad, mommy."

Mirna whispered, "I'm not sad. I'm happy for both of you."

I can't convey to you what this meant to me. Mirna too emerged unscathed. All those long years of repressed humanity were overturned with a simple gesture and a few words.

He responded by shouting, “You people are trouble-makers! They should never have let you out!” I had an urge to slap him, the same urge I’d felt in prison toward an informer. But I turned my back to him and walked away. According to Mirna, Mr. Ninovo likes his job, admires the president and is proud of “his” country. He enjoys listening to official propaganda on the radio. He has spent his life cleaning up the dirt of the bar’s customers and he’s satisfied with himself. I never met anyone like him in prison.

I was driven to despair by the thought that Mr. Ninovo was not the exception but the rule. It seemed to me that the last human beings were dying in prisons and camps and would leave no heirs, while a horrible mutation of the species was taking place outside. I thought of committing suicide, or of finding a way to return to my prison cell so as to live out my days among comrades and die among human beings.

But visions of horror are inverse Utopias. Recently my ten-year old daughter Yara put an end to my stupor, my “disorientation.” My condition began to improve the moment she entered the house. Her manner exuded the pride of a discoverer at the moment of completing a quest. The unqualified and unashamed happiness radiated by her face was an expression I hadn’t seen in years. On Yara’s chest was pinned a sheet of paper with the words, “Give us back our teacher!”

“What happened to your teacher?” I asked.

“They told us he had disappeared. But my girlfriend Julia wrote a sign that said, ‘People can’t disappear; something happens to them!’”

“What happens to them?” I asked.

“The same thing that happened to you. He was arrested.”

“How many took part in this protest?”

“All the kids in school,” Yara answered enthusiastically. “Everyone whispered about it all morning and after lunch everyone went to the school yard. Not a single student went back to class.”

“How did all this get started?” I asked. “Were the other teachers upset when he was fired?”

“The other teachers all seemed glad he’d disappeared,” Yara told me. “Yesterday I and three others in my class made some signs and this morning we told other kids we were going to wear them in the school yard. We told them not to let any of the teachers know. I loved him. I cried when he was replaced by another teacher who wouldn’t tell us when he’d come back’ and told us he’d disappeared. Lots of kids loved him, and if we hadn’t started making signs, other kids would have, because the schoolyard was full of signs.”

Yarostan’s first letter

Dear Sophia,
Forgive me for addressing you familiarly, as a friend; I have no way of knowing if you’re still the person I once knew. I can’t remember the sound of your voice, the shape of your face or the feel of your hand. I vaguely remember admiring the energy and intelligence in someone so young, but I regret that you didn’t leave a lasting mark, you didn’t become my guide in my journey through hell.

I wouldn’t even remember your name if you hadn’t written me twelve years ago. My wife Mirna memorized the name and address on the envelope because she attributed a strange power to your letter. Unfortunately I never saw that letter and never learned its contents.

Part of my reason for writing you now is that the activities of our omnipotent and omniscient police have been blocked. Letters aren’t being read by the eagle-eyed censors and letter-writers aren’t being escorted out of their homes by middle-of-the-night visitors. So I’m told. I want to believe it. Rebellious words and even gestures are becoming frequent and I haven’t seen or heard of the arrest of the rebels. Something is changing in this city, in the entire land; I don’t know if the change is permanent.

This change is reviving my interest in my surroundings, in my fellow beings, in myself, in you. If there is no change, if this is another illusion, if I’m not writing to Sophia but to a benevolent protector of the people’s real interests, a censor, then I’d rather be back in prison than “free.” There’s no joy in such freedom. Such a life is filled with dread and the only ones free

of that dread are those already in prison. If the change taking place around me is an illusion or a trap, then I no longer care if I'm arrested again. Even in solitary confinement a prisoner tortured by dampness and rats is comforted by the thought that others survived it, that they weren't crushed by moving walls or descending ceilings. But the policed "free citizen" can't ever get rid of the fear that he may be dragged off at any time, wherever he is, whoever he's with; that all his friendships and all his projects can suddenly end; that the front door of his house can crash open at midnight; that the ceiling of his bedroom might start descending on him while he's asleep. In a context where any word or gesture can lead to the dreaded arrest there's no freedom. In such a context, beings vibrant with the will to live are transformed into beings for whom death is no worse than a life marked by the dread of death. The prisons and camps don't contain only those inside them but also those outside them. All human beings are transformed into prisoners and prison guards.

I don't put the blame on prison guards. They're only workers. They're not inanimate things, cement walls that can neither see nor hear nor think. Most of them didn't choose their jobs; they ended up there because they thought they had no other choice. I've spent a total of twelve years inside walls, behind bars and fences, and I've never met a prison guard in whom I saw no trace of myself. I never met a guard who had dreamed that patrolling a convict yard would be the daily content of his life. Very few of those I've met admitted to never having dreamed, never having imagined themselves proud of projects undertaken with one or several genuine friends. Was our point of departure the same, and were we at some point interchangeable? How much has each of us contributed to what each has undergone? If a guard ever dreamed, was it of prisons and camps that he dreamed, and was he my jailer-to-be already then?

I can't say I failed to write you sooner because there were censors. I could have found ways to reach you without sending a letter through their hands. I could also have devised simple ways to camouflage the letter's origin, destination and content and sent it gliding unseen past the censor's omniscient gaze.

It's now three years since my release. During the first two years I wasn't able to remain in one place long enough to write a letter. This is apparently an illness that affects many individuals released after a long imprisonment. When the day of my release was so distant that I thought I wouldn't live to experience it, I was able to formulate clear and distinct ideas ordered with an impeccable logic. In conversations with inmates and in my imagination I composed one after another book unveiling the inverted practice

that seized a field intended for a garden and built a concentration camp. I thought all I needed was a table in a small room, a pen and paper and an occasional meal; I thought the ideas would flow by themselves.

When I'd been home for only half an hour after my release I rushed out of the house and spent the remainder of the day walking aimlessly. It wasn't because I wanted to see what had changed during my eight-year absence. I avoided studying the changes and gazed at the pavement. I was too familiar with the spirit in which those changes were created. Nor did I want to see or communicate with people who weren't convicts. They were altogether unfamiliar to me, almost a different type of creature, and I avoided them. I longed for the comrades I had left inside. We had shared insights and hardships, we had shared a common world, a common enemy and common hopes. I could no longer imagine myself becoming a self-policed imbecile who voluntarily put an end to his sleep so as to voluntarily reach a workshop at eight in the morning only to spend the day voluntarily turning out the number of parts which planners and managers had assigned to "his" machine. In prison such idiocy had only characterized newcomers; if they weren't quickly cured by fellow convicts, they became tools of the prison administration or else their stupidity was so abused by sadistic guards that they went insane or died of overwork.

For two years after my release I was unable to express myself in any form. I was "disoriented" and needed time to "adjust to freedom." I had grown used to the routine, the meals, the jobs, the guards; I had become attached to my comrades, to our conversations and arguments, to our imaginary common projects and breathtaking escapes. I missed all that. I was an exile, an alien among people whose activity I found incomprehensible, whose language I could neither speak nor understand, whose sympathy and communication I rejected because they seemed condescending and hypocritical. Of course I understood then as I do now that factories are prisons, foremen are not unlike prison guards, and the threat of firing or eviction causes as much terror as the threat of solitary confinement or deportation. But during those two years I concentrated on the differences between the two situations. The prisoners I had known had repressed words and gestures in the face of a rifle, but had regained their humanity when the repressive force withdrew. Among the outsiders I became aware of an altogether different type of repression: self-repression. My next-door neighbor, a Mr. Ninovo, is a cleaning man in a bar. The first time I ran into him I smiled and said "good evening." When he failed to respond to my greeting I apologized and said, "The evening obviously can't be good for someone who is about to spend it cleaning up after drunken bureaucrats."